

Position Paper:

PARTNERS FOR HEALTHY LIFESTYLES: NUTRITION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

THE BASIS

NYS PTA believes that comprehensive school health programs are an essential link in the health education/health care chain. In order to fulfill the responsibility of offering educational opportunities to all children, we need to recognize and deal with their health needs as they impact our schools and communities. Therefore, parents, schools, and communities are encouraged to work together in partnership to provide effective, comprehensive health programs and policies (PTA Position Statement: Health Programs).

THE ISSUES

Many issues impact children’s health including obesity, sedentary lifestyle, poor nutrition, substance use (nicotine, alcohol, drugs, inhalants, etc.), stress, mental illness, poverty, trauma and sports injuries.

Childhood obesity is a complex health issue that occurs when a child is well above the healthy and normal weight for his/her age and height. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 17% of children, about 12.7 million, are obese. From years 2011-2014 among children ages 2-19, obesity affects 1 in 6 children and adolescents in the US. New York State is experiencing a similar epidemic of childhood obesity; a third of New York’s children are obese or overweight (NYS Obesity Statistics).

Factors that may lead to obesity include consuming high calorie, low nutrition foods and beverages; sedentary lifestyles and insufficient physical activity; poor sleep routines; and genetics. Children with obesity are more likely to become adults with obesity, increasing their risk of heart disease, Type 2 Diabetes, liver disease and cancer (CDC Obesity Data, CDC Obesity Causes).

Establishing healthy behaviors among young people has proven more effective than efforts to change unhealthy behaviors already established among adults.

While parents control most food choices in the home and their support encourages their children to be more physically active, schools can play a critical role in modeling healthy behaviors. Research shows that well-designed, well-implemented school programs can effectively promote students’ physical activity and healthy eating.

Food insecurity, a “lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life” according to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), is also a concern for families. Further, the USDA states that the “consequence of food insecurity, because of prolonged, involuntary lack of food, results in discomfort, illness, weakness or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation.”

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx>

According to Feeding America, “in 2015, an estimated 1 in 8 Americans were food insecure, equating to 42 million Americans including 13 million children.”

<https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/understand-food-insecurity/>

WHAT WE NEED TO DO

In supporting parents' efforts to ensure their children's health, school policies and programs:

- Should foster the adoption of healthy diets and age-appropriate physical activity; and
- should provide students with daily physical education and access to safe, appropriate facilities and equipment.

In 2010, the Federal Government and New York State mandated that local schools implement wellness policies, including community involvement (Local School Wellness Policy Summary). One way that parents, school and community can partner is in developing an effective school wellness policy. It should be reviewed and assessed annually, and by including all stakeholders, creates a critical partnership for the promotion of healthy lifestyles.

As Partners for Healthy Lifestyles, home, school and community should work to ensure that:

- School health programs use factual and science-based curricula to give students the knowledge and skills needed to make informed decisions and practice healthy behaviors;
- Food available at school is high in vitamins, minerals, and low in fat /trans-fat, sugar, sodium, cholesterol, and calories; reflects science-based nutritional standards for school foods and beverages; and complies with national guidelines for school-aged children;
- Healthy fundraisers are supported and encouraged;
- Physical education and/or sports classes are provided and maintained for all students, grades K-12, according the NYS Education Department regulations (NYSED PE);
- Recommendations for physical activity in the classroom are utilized (<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/physicalactivity/classroom-pa.htm>);
- Programs and policies are developed to create safe areas for play, cycling, and walking; and parties promote public awareness of the need for accessible safe recreation opportunities in the community;
- Communities offer a variety of extracurricular activities that enhance student participation and increase opportunities for cooperation among schools, students, parents and community organizations.

NYS PTA has adopted resolutions and positions regarding the following healthy lifestyle issues:

- age-appropriate, science-based standards that are periodically reviewed by health experts
- sufficient time to eat breakfast and lunch
- food or beverages never to be used as incentives or rewards
- additional funding for school meal programs and expansion of the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program
- a recess period for all elementary school children with no withholding of recess as a means of discipline
- establishment and implementation of nutrition and physical education competencies and strict standards of accountability
- adequate funding so that all school districts can offer healthy foods and beverages

Children must hear consistent messages from home and school. Effecting changes in children's dietary habits and patterns of physical activity will require the combined efforts of many stakeholders. As partners in advocacy, parents, educators and community members must teach and model the habits and behaviors of healthy living and must advocate to policy makers for the adoption and funding of policies and programs to promote healthy lifestyles. Our goal must be that our children will live what they learn and become healthy, active citizens.

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